U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Wolf Tracks

A Summary of Gray Wolf Activities and Issues

February 1999

Introduction

At one time gray wolves were near extinction in the lower 48 states. But, from a single small population in Minnesota, they expanded into Wisconsin and Michigan. It is believed that Minnesota now has over 2000 wolves and the Wisconsin/Michigan population is over 300. In the northern U.S. Rocky Mountains, wolves emigrated from Canada into northwest Montana where there are about 75 wolves. The wolves reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho are increasing faster than expected and number about 160 wolves in those areas. Reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf to formerly occupied habitats in the Southwest began in 1998. Nearly 200 Mexican gray wolves exist in captivity.

Due to these increases in gray wolf numbers and range in the continental United States, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is reviewing potential changes to Endangered Species Act (ESA) protection for gray wolves. "Wolf Tracks" is our way of letting you know what we are doing and to provide an explanation of issues surrounding our actions and gray wolf recovery. This is the first "Wolf Tracks," future issues will be sent periodically. A copy of "Wolf Tracks" is also on our website at www.fws.gov/r3pao/wolf.

FWS to Propose Changes to Gray Wolf Status

On June 29, 1998, the Department of the Interior announced that the Service was looking at the health of gray wolf populations in the conterminous U.S. The purpose of this review was to determine what, if any, changes to Endangered Species Act protection are needed for the various wolf populations.

Based on the Service's review, we expect to propose changes to Endangered Species Act protection for gray wolves during the first part of 1999. In the mean time, the Service has and will continue talking with agencies, groups, and individuals who have been partners in wolf recovery and who will be involved in future management (State and Tribal natural resource management agencies, environmental organizations, concerned citizens, etc.) to learn of your concerns and hopes for changes in Federal protection for gray wolves.

ESA Rulemaking Process

The process used to change a species from endangered to threatened or to remove a species from Endangered Species Act protection is a formal legal process called "rulemaking." The Service will follow this process to propose and then possibly adopt regulations to delist and reclassify segments of the gray wolf populations in the lower 48 states. If adopted, those regulations have the effect of law.

After the Service has reviewed the health of wolf populations and discussed issues with concerned agencies, groups, and individuals, we will publish a "proposed rule" in the *Federal Register* that describes the changes in gray wolf protection that we think should be made.

The proposal to make changes in wolf protection will be publicized in many ways (newspaper notices, letters to concerned agencies, groups, and individuals, and notification to those on our mailing list) to make sure that all interested individuals and organizations know about it. When the proposal to delist is published, the document will be available from our website at www.fws.gov/r3pao/wolf.

After a proposal is published, there will be a public comment period of at least 60 days. The public comment period will provide an opportunity for any interested party to provide data or comments relevant to the proposed action. If requested, the Service will hold one or more public hearings to receive oral comments.

After the public comment period has closed, the Service reviews all new data and comments received during the comment period and reconsiders the proposed action. Alternate actions or modifications of the proposal are also considered. A final decision is published in the *Federal Register*, announcing the effective date of the action. In some cases the final decision may be to withdraw the proposed action or to adopt a modified version of the proposed action. A final decision on the wolf is anticipated to be made within one year of the publication of a proposed rule.

Timeline for Proposed Changes to Gray Wolf Status

If we decide to propose changes to the ESA listing of the gray wolf, here is a tentative timeline:

■ early 1999

The Service publishes a proposal in the *Federal Register* which describes the proposed changes and rationale. This proposal is publicized in a variety of ways to ensure that all interested individuals and organizations are aware of it. It is the policy of the Service to solicit the expert opinion of independent specialists regarding the scientific or commercial data in proposed listings.

■ **60 to 120 days following publication of proposal**
A subsequent public comment period of at least 60 days will provide an opportunity for any interested person or group to provide data or other comments relevant to any proposed action. Written comments will be accepted during this public comment period. The Service will conduct public information meetings to explain the proposal and get feedback. Additionally, the Service may hold public hearings to receive oral comments.

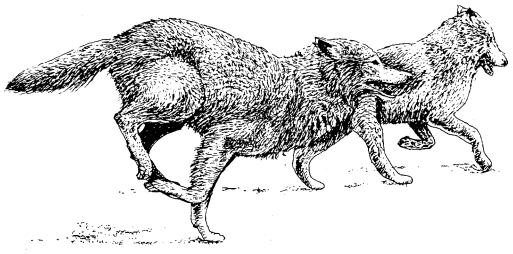
■ **within 12 months after the initial proposal**
After the public comment period has closed the Service will review all new data and comments received during the comment period and reconsider the proposed action. Alternate actions or modifications of the proposal will also be considered.

■ **early 2000**
A final decision will be published in the *Federal Register*, announcing the effective date of any action. The final decision may be to withdraw the proposed action or to adopt a modified version of the proposed action. A final decision on the wolf could be made within one year of the publication of the proposed rule.

Note: The timeline is tentative. Timing of the actions described above will depend on when our review of gray wolf populations and their status is completed and when the proposed rule is published.

Future Wolf Management if Species Delisted

Many people have expressed concern that gray wolves will be indiscriminately hunted and killed in the Upper Midwest if they are no longer protected by the Endangered Species Act. Human-caused mortality was a principle factor that brought the gray wolf to near extinction in the lower 48 states. However, to remove the gray wolf from the threatened and endangered list, the Service must analyze future threats and determine that the population will be viable for the foreseeable future. Steps have been and continue to be taken to ensure that gray wolf populations are and will remain viable, including control of human-caused mortality.



Steps that are being taken to ensure continued viable populations of the gray wolf include development of state and tribal management plans. As a part of their own management responsibilities and in anticipation of wolf delisting, the states of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin began developing wolf management plans. Some Native American tribes are also developing management plans or providing information on their wolf management direction. If the Service were to propose delisting, it would not do so unless the gray wolf management plans ensure viable populations of the species for the forseeable future.

Future Wolf Management if Species Delisted (cont'd.)

Additionally, anti-wolf sentiment does not appear to run as deep as it once did in the Upper Midwest. People who live in areas with wolves are generally tolerant of them as long as there is a mechanism to reduce wolf conflicts with domestic animals. The wolf depredation control program that is operated in Minnesota by Wildlife Services of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has reduced such conflicts for several decades. Wildlife Services removes wolves and wolf packs involved in livestock losses verified as being wolf-caused. Reducing those conflicts has generally resulted in public support for wolf recovery and allowed the Minnesota wolf population to expand and recolonize Wisconsin and Michigan.

State and Tribal Wolf Management Plans

Summaries of State and Tribal Plans

Michigan - The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has completed a wolf management plan for the state. The primary component of this plan is increased public education in coordination with wolf monitoring and protection. Presently, the state does not see the need to expand wolf habitat or prey management programs. The final plan sets a minimum goal of 200 wolves on the Upper Peninsula (excluding Isle Royale) and anticipates that the wolf population may expand to as many as 800 animals. The complete document is available on the web at www.dnr.state.mi.us/wildlife/indices/wolf.htm.

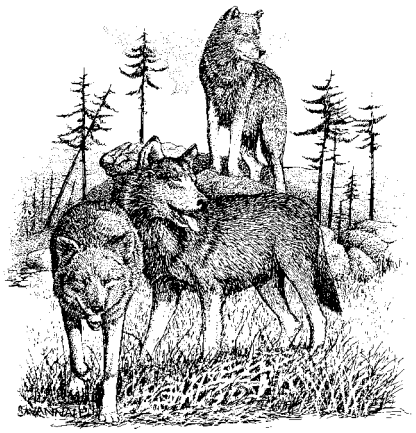
Wisconsin - The Wisconsin DNR has not finalized its wolf management plan. The draft plan, which has been out for public review and is being revised, sets a goal of 300-500 wolves. The state's wolf management strategies include: managing wolves in 3 different zones, monitoring wolf populations and wolf health, managing for wolf habitat, promoting public education, and controlling nuisance wolves. The revised draft plan is expected to be available from the Wisconsin DNR by late February. A copy of Wisconsin's current draft plan is available to the public and may be obtained by contacting the WolfLine at 612-713-7337. It is also on the web at http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/wolfdrft/index.htm.

Minnesota - Currently, the Minnesota DNR is developing a wolf management plan based on the outline known as the Minnesota Wolf Management Roundtable Consensus Recommendations. The Minnesota DNR is expected to set a minimum wolf population goal at or above the 1,250 to 1,400 stated in the Federal Recovery Plan. The Roundtable members recommended a minimum statewide wolf population of 1,600 animals and further recommended that the DNR not use this number as a maximum population goal. Roundtable recommendations also include expanding the wolf depredation compensation program to assure tolerance/acceptance of the animals in rural areas and an annual review of all phases of the preventative depredation measures part of the plan, which emphasizes non-lethal control methods.

The Roundtable members requested that monthly reports of the preventative depredation phase of the plan be made available to the public. Furthermore, the Roundtable Consensus Recommendations prohibit any consideration of sport hunting or trapping of wolves for five years after delisting. The completed management plan for Minnesota should be available early in 1999.

Tribal Plans - The Service has received statements from a number of tribes regarding their concern for the future of the wolf. At present, no tribal management plans in the Midwest have been developed, although two Minnesota tribes (Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians) have indicated that they are likely to develop wolf management plans. Some tribes already protect the wolf in the tribal code; others have wolf protective resolutions such as strong law enforcement, careful population monitoring and bans on trapping, hunting or poisoning. Michigan and Wisconsin each have a representative from the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Commission on their wolf planning teams and Minnesota incorporated several representatives from various tribes on their roundtable.

With the state and tribal management plans in different stages of completion, how can the Service proceed?
The Service expects that wolves in the western Great Lakes area will meet the 1992 Federal Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Plan's numerical delisting criteria in early 1999. It is likely that the Michigan-Wisconsin wolf population will be four times greater than the level specified in that Recovery Plan. The Service and the Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Team have reviewed the completed Michigan wolf management plan, the draft Wisconsin wolf management plan, and the Minnesota Wolf Management Roundtable Consensus Recommendations, which will form the basis for the Minnesota wolf management plan. We and the Recovery Team agree that these two preliminary and one final wolf management plans - if carried out as currently written - will control threats to wolves and continue to promote the species' conservation. We also believe those plans clearly establish the intended goals and direction of future state wolf management; therefore we can make a preliminary analysis of future threats to the wolf and start the formal rulemaking process. However, until we have reasonable assurances that they will be adequately protected under state and tribal law, we do not intend to delist any gray wolf populations. Additional analysis of future threats to wolves will occur as the management plans are finalized and as we receive other data during the comment period. Also, we intend to make the finalized state wolf management plans available for public review during the comment period on our upcoming proposal. If the final state management plans change significantly, any proposed change in wolf status would have to be re-evaluated and an additional public comment period may be necessary.



State and Tribal Wolf Management Plans (cont'd.)

Why doesn't the Fish and Wildlife Service just tell the states and tribes how to manage the gray wolf, if it is delisted?
We do not have authority, under Federal law, to dictate to states or tribes how to manage gray wolf populations if they are no longer protected by the Act. It will be the responsibility of the states and tribes (not the Federal government) to manage the gray wolf if it is removed from the threatened and endangered species list. However, the continued viability of gray wolf populations must be reasonably assured before the Service can remove it from the Act's protection. The state management plans are the likely mechanism for ensuring continued viability of wolf populations. Therefore, we think that there are basic elements for ensuring continued viability that should be included in those plans. We will be looking for the inclusion of such components as monitoring (of wolf numbers, range, diseases, prey, and habitat conditions), law enforcement, maintaining dispersal corridors, control of depredating wolves, and a commitment to implement the plan. The details of how these are carried out will be up to the states and the tribes.

Since management of the wolf, if it is delisted, will be the responsibility of the states and tribes, questions and comments regarding their management plans should be directed to the appropriate Department of Natural Resources. Data and information which indicate that the management plans will or will not ensure a viable population for the foreseeable future will be accepted by the Service during the public comment period following a proposal to delist/reclassify.

Wolf Recovery in Idaho, Yellowstone and Montana

By the 1930s, gray wolves were eliminated from the northern Rocky Mountains because of direct conflict with people. Wolves were reported and occasionally killed from the 1940s through the 1970s in Montana, Idaho, and the greater Yellowstone area, but breeding was not confirmed. However, conditions for the return of wolves steadily improved as ungulate (i.e., hoofed animals) populations increased after the lows at the turn of the century. By the late 1960s, even before passage of the ESA, calls were made to restore wolves to Yellowstone National Park. After the gray wolf was listed as endangered under the ESA, the Service appointed a Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Team. That Team completed a Recovery Plan in 1980 which was revised after considerable review and then approved in 1987.

The Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan recommends that natural recovery be promoted in portions of northwestern Montana and central Idaho and wolves be reintroduced into the greater Yellowstone area. The Service leads a complex recovery program, based on that plan. Five Federal agencies, three State wildlife agencies, at least seven Native American tribes, and land management agencies in at least four levels of government are involved.

In 1986 gray wolves from Canada dispersed into northwestern Montana and reproduced for the first time in 60 years. Wolves were first reintroduced in 1995 and again in 1996 into central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park. After just two years, higher reproduction, low mortality and minimal movement out of the experimental population areas eliminated the need for additional reintroductions. The minimum recovery goal identified in the Recovery Plan is 10 breeding pairs in each of three recovery areas. The recovery areas are northwestern Montana, central Idaho and the Greater Yellowstone Area. Once the goal is achieved for three successive years, gray wolves could be taken off the endangered species list.

Currently there are 55-60 wolves in eight packs or pairs in northwestern Montana, of which five packs produced pups. In the Greater Yellowstone Area there are about 120 wolves in 10 packs of which eight produced pups; and central Idaho has approximately 110-120 wolves in 13 packs of which 10 are known to have produced pups. The wolf population in northwestern Montana has apparently declined in the last two years. Wolf recovery is still ahead of schedule and costs are less than predicted. The gray wolf in the U.S. northern Rockies could reach recovery goals as early as 2002, if the number of wolves continues to increase as they have in the last two years.

For weekly updates on the recovery of gray wolves in the Yellowstone area, visit our web site at www.r6.fws.gov/wolf/index.htm or the International Wolf Center site at www.wolf.org/wolfnews/ystone.

Court Order to Remove Reintroduced Wolves from Idaho and Yellowstone

In December 1994, the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, and several other groups represented by the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (now called Earth-Justice), the Urbigikits, and the American Farm Bureau Federation, represented by the Mountain States Legal Foundation, went to court to present their cases regarding the reintroduction. The District Court of Wyoming allowed wolves to be released in January 1995. However, in December 1997 that same court ruled that the experimental rules were illegal. It ordered that all the reintroduced wolves and their offspring be removed. The court stayed its own order pending appeal to the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver, Colorado.

The Service and a host of conservation groups are appealing the Wyoming Court's opinion and a final decision is expected sometime in 1999.

Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery

Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Objective

The objectives of the Mexican gray wolf recovery program in the southwestern United States are to:

- establish and maintain a captive population to prevent imminent extinction of the Mexican gray wolf and
- reestablish a wild population of at least 100 Mexican gray wolves within their historic range, which includes parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and northern Mexico.

Captive Breeding Program

Between 1977 and 1980, five wolves (four males and one pregnant female) were live-captured in Durango and Chihuahua, Mexico, to establish a captive population of Mexican wolves called the "certified" lineage. By 1983 the captive breeding program was firmly established. During that year three litters totaling 15 pups were born. Based largely on the results of DNA studies, two additional lineages of captive Mexican wolves, one each in the United States and Mexico, were certified for inclusion in the official breeding program for Mexican wolves in July 1995.

As of January 1999, the captive population consists of about 180 Mexican wolves held in 40 zoos and wildlife sanctuaries in the United States and Mexico. This population is the result of captive breeding from the three officially accepted lineages of Mexican wolves.

Management of the captive population follows a *Species Survival Plan* (Survival Plan) developed and implemented by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association. The Survival Plan objective is to establish and maintain a captive population of at least 240 animals with a minimum of 17 breeding pairs to conserve at least 75% of the founding wolves' gene diversity for the next 50 years. With the assistance of computer programs, the population is managed to minimize inbreeding and maximize retention of the seven founders' genetic diversity.

Some concern has been expressed over the captive population's limited genetic base. With only seven founders, some inbreeding cannot be avoided. However, no adverse effects of inbreeding have been detected in the population. The recent inclusion of the two additional breeding lines will increase gene diversity and further reduce the likelihood of inbreeding problems in the population.

In late 1996, five pairs of "release-candidate" wolves (i.e., wolves that may eventually be released into the wild) were moved to a remote pre-release acclimation facility on the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge near Socorro, New Mexico. One year later, five additional release-candidate pairs were transferred to a similar facility constructed by the Turner Endangered Species Fund on

the Ladder Ranch in southern New Mexico. At these facilities, contact between wolves and humans is minimized and wolves are introduced to road-killed carcasses of native prey species, mostly deer and elk, to supplement their routine diet of zoo canine food.

The Reestablishment Plan

Reintroduction of Mexican wolves was approved by the Secretary of the Interior in March 1997. Under the approved plan, captive-raised Mexican wolves are being released into the Apache National Forest in eastern Arizona and allowed to recolonize the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in east-central Arizona and west-central New Mexico. The plan calls for annual releases of about 10 to 15 wolves, for three to five years. Continued population growth will result from natural reproduction to achieve a final, self-sustaining population of 100 or more free-ranging, wild Mexican wolves in 8 to 10 years.

Released wolves and their progeny are designated a "nonessential, experimental population" under provisions of section 10(j) of the ESA. The Service believes that this designation provides adequate protection for recovery and appropriate management flexibility for addressing potential wolf-human conflicts, especially livestock depredation.

The Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area includes all of the Apache and Gila National Forests in east-central Arizona and west-central New Mexico, encompassing about 7,000 square miles (about two times the size of Yellowstone National Park). Elevations range from about 4,000 feet in the semi-desert lowlands and along the San Francisco River to 10,000 feet on Mount Baldy, Escudilla Mountain, and the Mogollon Mountains. Vegetation varies from grasses and shrubs in the lowest areas; pinyon, juniper, and evergreen oaks in the foothills at low to middle elevations; and mixed-conifer stands at higher elevations. Open grassy meadows occur throughout. Water is available in natural springs, streams, and rivers. Wild ungulate species include white-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and javelina. About 1 million acres (25%) are designated or managed as wilderness.

Release of Mexican wolves

After about two months of acclimation, eleven Mexican wolves representing three family groups were "soft released" in the Apache National Forest on March 29, 1998. A soft release involves holding wolves in on-site pens prior to their release. This procedure allows the wolves to acclimate to the release area and reduces tendencies to disperse from this area following release. While in the pens, wolves are fed carcasses of native prey species. Supplemental feeding of carcasses continues for about two months following the wolves' release until sufficient killing of prey is confirmed. Supplemental feeding is also used as a management tool in specific situations to maintain wolf health and influence behavior.

Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery (cont'd.)

Three weeks following their release, three subadult members of one family group killed a mature elk, demonstrating that these captive-reared wolves retained basic hunting instincts. Additional kills of adult elk and elk calves by the two remaining family groups have been documented. All confirmed prey have been elk, although deer also occur in the areas occupied by the released wolves. Field observations suggest that most have been young of the year, old, or injured individuals.

A dispersing yearling female attacked and injured a miniature horse colt which recovered following veterinary care. Field evidence suggested that another wolf probably killed a ranch dog. The Defenders of Wildlife organization compensated the animal's owners for both of these depredation incidents. Other wolves have been observed pursuing livestock, but no killing of livestock by wolves has been confirmed.

Field evidence suggests that both alpha females remaining in the wild during the whelping season gave birth to pups in early May, 1998. Only one pup is known to have survived birth. The mother of this pup was illegally shot and killed on August 7. Subsequent to its mother's death, the pup was observed with its father for two weeks and was last observed on August 22.

One adult male was shot and killed on April 28 by a camper who believed the wolf posed a threat to him and his family. Four wolves (one adult female, one 2-year-old female, and two yearling males) were illegally shot on August 7, October 18, November 6, and November 22, respectively. Persons responsible for these wolf killings have not been identified. Three wolves were captured and returned to captivity: one lone, pregnant female whose mate was shot, and two dispersing subadult females that frequented human settlements and harassed livestock. One adult female slipped out of her radiocollar after apparently getting her head stuck in a hollow log. She was last observed with her mate on September 23 and is presumed dead.

Two adult females were placed in holding pens in or near the territories of the two remaining adult males on November 16. The two males were captured on November 18 and 23 and placed in the pens with their new mates. These two pairs were released to the wild on December 11, 1998. By January 27th, one of the pairs had been recaptured and placed back in the acclimitization pen. On January 7th an adult pair and their three eight-month-old pups were transfered to an acclimitization pen in Arizona . Four more wolves, an adult pair and their two pups were placed in a seperate acclimitization pen on January 14th. The date for the release of these nine wolves has not yet been determined. An additional 8-10 wolves are planned to be released in February and March 1999.

Ongoing Litigation

In March 1998 the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association and eight other groups supportive of the livestock industry filed suit in the Federal District Court of New Mexico to stop the reintroduction project (New Mexico Cattle Grower's Association, et al. vs. U.S. Fish and Wildlife service et al., Civil Action No CIV-98-0367-HB/LFG). This case is pending and has not been heard by the Court.

Periodic updates on Mexican wolf recovery activities are on our world wide web site at http://ifw2es.fws.gov/wolf/